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Active Idaho conservative to chair energy panel

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Washington—The cluster of 14 television and radio microphones faced in one direction, toward Senator Henry M. Jackson. The Washington Democrat was expounding on a new Senate report relating United States foreign policy and oil imports.

Next to him at last week's news conference sat Senator James A. McClure. There was no microphone before the Idaho Republican and no questions went in his direction. He spoke only after Senator Jackson had set forth his views.

The session allowed Mr. Jackson to steal the show—as usual—but it may have been one of his last flings at such prominence on Capitol Hill. Mr. McClure, little known outside Idaho, is about to be allowed to upstage Mr. Jackson, one of the Senate's best known figures.

When the Senate meets in January under Republican control, the microphones will be shifted in Mr. McClure's direction as he takes over as head of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, replacing

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Mr. Jackson, who has been Congress's most recognized and vocal expert on energy policy in the seven years since the oil embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

More than personalities will be shifted, too. Mr. McClure, an active, forthright conservative, will be bringing a dramatic philosophic change to the committee leadership, one of the most complete turnarounds on Capitol Hill in memory.

Mr. Jackson led the battle there by Democrats for federal price controls on oil and backed creation of the Energy Department as the government's instrument to deal with the energy industry. He is an advocate of a strong federal role to protect consumers.

Senator McClure shares Ronald Reagan's visceral reaction to such interference, unless absolutely necessary.

"The government doesn't produce any oil, the government doesn't produce any gas," said Mr. McClure in an interview off the Senate floor. "If there is going to be any oil—if there is going to be more natu-

private sector.

"That is where we are going to have to look for supply that will keep the prices as low as possible. I think the past policy [of federal regulations] has been a failure. The voters have repudiated it."

His voice growing firmer as he dealt with a favorite subject, Mr. McClure said he would actively press for policies that would "make the government a partner [in energy development] but would look primarily to the private sector to bring some relief from our dependence upon OPEC oil imports."

"As far as our past policy is concerned, we have been OPEC's best friend," he said.

As a sign of his thinking two months before taking over as chairman, Mr. McClure said he would like to speed up the decontrol of natural gas prices, now scheduled to be completely phased out by 1985. He also wants to do away with the windfall profits tax on oil companies, which he described as an excise tax that is passed along to consumers in higher prices but which discourages production.

Such sentiments and Mr. McClure's elevation to chairman of the important energy committee are being greeted with glee by the industry.

"In our study of 57 issues such as price controls and government regulations, on all 57 in three Congresses, Senator Jackson scored zero and Senator McClure scored 95," said Lloyd Unsell, executive vice president of the Independent Petroleum Association, a leading group of oil producers. "So I would say based on this survey that we are overjoyed" with the change in chairman.

On the other hand, groups representing consumer interests are deeply apprehensive, although their officials have had little close dealing with Mr. McClure because of his antagonistic views and position only as a minority member of the committee.

"He is Mr. Nuclear, Mr. Coal, Mr. Oil, Mr. Industry," said Ed Rothschild, director of Energy Action. "He will do anything the industry wants."

"Mr. McClure is opposed to everything we stand for," added Ellen Berman, director of the Consumer Energy Council of America. "We fear that he will give away the whole ballgame, but it is hard to imag-

Responding to these charges, Mr. McClure said: "I don't own any oil stock and there is no oil in my state."

"My view is that there has not been enough energy production and it must be increased to keep prices at the pump as low as possible," he said.

Mr. McClure, a low-key, 55-year-old lawyer from the small apple-growing community of Payette on the Snake River across from Oregon, is going to exercise an influence over energy policy far beyond one vote.

As chairman, with the expected support of the committee's new majority of Republicans, he is going to be able to set the schedule and agenda for the panel, appoint the bulk of the staff and decide what studies will be made. He already has named as committee staff director his administrative assistant, Mike Hathaway.

The Republicans share Mr. McClure's emphasis on stepping up domestic energy production, and most of the diminished band of Democrats on the committee also are in that camp.

Mr. McClure said he intends to reshape the subcommittee to devote more attention to overseeing use of the public lands and other natural resources. As one who warned in the House of Representatives in the late 1960s of the coming energy crisis long before the embargo, Mr. McClure now is warning of coming severe mineral shortages.

Committee observers also expect Mr. McClure to press for a speedup in the leasing of federal lands offshore and in the West for oil and gas production, an easing of federal restrictions on the nuclear industry and cutbacks in some environmental controls that are said to inhibit use of coal and add costs to industry generally.

"When you consider an unemployed autoworker in Detroit, his environment is pretty bad," said Senator McClure. "The same is true of the unemployed steelwork-

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